

Decals ease keyboard confusion

While in the Macintosh world a "mouse" often conveys commands to the computer, in the IBM realm it's the keyboard that translates your orders.

Because of this arrangement, using any full-featured program that runs on IBM personal computers — like WordPerfect — means keeping track of dozens of key-stroke combinations.

WordPerfect Corp.'s solution is a template — a plastic laminated legend with color-coded commands — that either surrounds the 10 function keys on the left side of old-style keyboards, or runs across the function keys on the newer extended keyboard. Either template works and the price — free — is certainly right, but there are alternatives. For WordPerfect 5.0, for example, here are three:

■ Decals from Data-Cal Corp., 3401 E. Broadway, No. 8, Phoenix, Ariz. 85040. At \$14.95, these key-top overlays are the lowest-priced alternative that I tried. These decals display the same WordPerfect template information on tiny adhesive overlays that affix directly



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on top of the function keys and certain other command keys.

The commands are color-coded according to the WordPerfect template system and the combination keys — Ctrl, Alt and Shift — are designated with the appropriate colored dot overlay.

■ Keycaps. Next up in price at \$49.95 is the SnapCap key and decal system offered by Hoolean Corp., P.O. Box 201, Cornville, Ariz. 86325. This particular system works only on the new IBM PS/2 101-key keyboards. For other keyboards they offer a decal-only setup.

SnapCaps take advantage of the two piece design of the keys on the newer keyboards: you just pinch the key, pulling its outer cap, and replace it with the imprinted cap.

The Ctrl, Alt and Shift keys, however, get just a colored decal bar.

■ Replacement keys. For the deluxe approach to customized keyboards, there's the Syncronics key replacement system. Contact the company at 4901 Morena Blvd., Suite 302, San Diego, 92117.

No skimpy decals or key caps here. This \$74.95 system, available on some IBM, Compaq and Keytronics keyboards, requires you to yank keys off your keyboard with an included tool and to replace them with the WordPerfect-coded substitutes.

The improved appearance is impressive. Even with poor peripheral vision you'll be able to find the completely colored red Ctrl keys, blue Alt key and green Shift keys.

So is all this key-top fiddling worth it? My administrative assistant uses the Data-Cal decals on an old-style clone keyboard. She says she would never go back to the easily misplaced freebie template that comes with WordPerfect.

The keycaps were a breeze to install and would be easy to update when necessary. I was bothered,

however, by the printing on some of the keys.

The replacement keys are the easiest to read, but I encountered a very serious problem. Many of the keys didn't work properly after installation. After repositioning them carefully over their springs, the problem seemed to go away.

If you use one program predominantly, the cost and effort of replacing or overlaying the original key cap info might make sense. But when you're toggling among several programs everyday, a template system is more versatile.

■ The Bottom Line: If you're still using the old function-keys-on-the-left keyboard, you may prefer to retire your template for a set of decals. But for keyboards with the finger-stretching function keys across the top, I personally prefer to use the template that comes with WordPerfect.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity.